

## flying solo

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/28106682) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/28106682>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Teen And Up Audiences</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">No Archive Warnings Apply</a>
Category:	<a href="#">Gen</a>
Fandoms:	<a href="#">Video Blogging RPF</a> , <a href="#">Minecraft (Video Game)</a>
Relationships:	<a href="#">Technoblade &amp; TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Technoblade &amp; Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF)</a>
Characters:	<a href="#">TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Wilbur Soot</a> , <a href="#">Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF)</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence</a> , <a href="#">Family Dynamics</a> , <a href="#">Sibling Bonding</a> , <a href="#">Angst with a Happy Ending</a> , <a href="#">Hurt/Comfort</a>
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2020-12-16 Words: 5,870 Chapters: 1/1

# **flying solo**

by [meridies](#)

## Summary

"Tommy," Techno says, "What the hell are you doing in my basement?"

or, Tommy's secret is discovered way too quickly, and the two of them are forced to learn how to be brothers again.

## Notes

it's the way i told myself i wouldn't write another dsmp fic... and then today's stream happened. hope you enjoy!!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Techno's golden apples are missing.

They were right there in his chest, beside his spare set of diamond armor. Techno remembers seeing them there, yesterday, when he was reorganizing his storage system. Curiously, he looks into the chest next to it, and then the third one. He sorts through stacks of building materials and glossy emeralds and sees nothing even close to his golden apples. They seem to have vanished into thin air.

“Phil?” Techno calls, and hears a muffled response from the other room. “Have you been sorting through my things?”

His father emerges from the back room. “No. I wouldn’t do that unless you asked.”

Techno closes the chest. Opens the next one. Corked glass bottles clink against each other in even, spaced lines. Or, what should be evenly spaced lines.

“Are you sure?” Techno repeats, baffled. “A potion of mine is missing.”

Phil frowns. He crosses the room to peer into the potions chest. “A strength potion?”

“I would have remembered if I were going into combat.”

“Yeah, you’re retired,” Phil laughs. A divot appears between his brows when he looks more closely. “That’s odd. I’m certain that no one else knows where you live.”

“Strange,” Techno mutters. He doesn’t like the idea of someone coming into his house and stealing his things, and he trusts Phil with his life; if Phil says it wasn’t him, then it wasn’t.

“I can brew you a new one,” Phil offers, “Besides, some of them are close to expiring anyway.”

“Hm.”

Techno looks at the potions once more. Most of the bottles are clouded over with dust and age; long gone are the days when Techno would use them in combat. He still recognizes them by their sheen, though; strength, swiftness, regeneration. Lined up in even shades of pink and red. His hand brushes over a stoppered potion of poison, a sickly green, and pauses.

There are fingerprints. Fresh fingerprints, that belong to hands smaller than both his and Phil’s.

Techno sits back on his heels. Curiosity pricks at the back of his skull, an uncomfortable itch. Who is at his base? Who is taking from his things?

The more curious thing is that, to the best of his knowledge, there’s no wars occurring on the server. There’s a stalemate, born from betrayal and broken friendships, and there’s a divide expanding between the different territories, but there’s no fighting, not like there was months

ago. Why would someone drink a strength potion unless they're terribly injured? What would be the point?

"Phil," Techno calls again, "If you saw anyone approach the house, you would tell me, right?"

"Of course," Phil says. "Is there someone you're worried about?"

Techno's mind flashes to red-trimmed sleeves and a mop of shocking blond hair.

"No," he says, and pushes the thought away, "There's no one."

He closes the chest. The potion bottles, the dusty fingerprints, the missing golden apples. Techno's always been good at puzzles, hasn't he? One way or another, he'll pull the silk threads of this mystery together.

Techno sees it out of the corner of his eye. There's brick dust on the floor where there shouldn't be. Right by the ladder to the lower floor.

He smiles. One thread, pulled in the right direction.

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It's the third day when Techno realizes that things are taken in a particular order and a particular way, most definitely not at random.

It's not just the golden apples. It's one of his swords, leftover from the Siege of Manburg. It was dull and the enchantments were fading, needing to be refreshed, so Techno doesn't mourn its loss. He makes a slow, steady trek throughout his entire base, instead, to try and see if there's anything missing.

It goes like this: dried fruit. Nonperishable jerky. One dented iron helmet that was going to be melted and scrapped for parts. A blue, fur lined coat, meant for the cold. Thirteen smooth, glossy ender pearls. A crossbow, warped from old age.

They're all things Techno was planning to throw out at some point—things that didn't benefit him at all, useless heavy weight. Therefore, Techno concludes, this thief is very smart. And knows Techno, because they take just enough to seemingly survive without it being outright noticeable.

Phil leaves that night, making the long, snowy trek back to L'Manburg's central city. Techno waves him a purposely loud goodbye, closes the door, and begins to plan.

He's not imagining things. There's something—someone—living underneath his base. Stealing his items. Taking his things. Leaving fingerprints on ancient potion bottles and snooping around, arrogant enough that he thinks he won't be noticed.

Techno dims the lanterns and sits in absolute, breathless silence. He rests one palm on the hilt of his sword, glowing faintly in the dark, and waits. He's certain that if he's patient enough—and Technoblade is nothing but patient—he will find whoever it is.

The moon rises high in the sky, a rare full moon on a cloudless night, and silver light pours through the slits of the window drapes. Techno waits, netherite armor gleaming purple, and right as he believes that it's a lost cause, that the spy won't be stealing anything tonight—

He hears a faint scratching, coming from his basement.

Stone bricks shift, quietly, and are slid back into place. Someone's footsteps, light and unrecognizable, begin to climb up the ladder. They must be aware of all the creaking parts of it; if Techno didn't already know there was someone in his house, he would have just passed it off as a trick of the night.

A shadowed figure comes up onto the first floor. They have a hood over their head, and they don't notice Techno, waiting silently in the corner.

In one dramatic, swift motion, Techno lights up the lantern.

And everything in him comes to a screeching, terrible halt.

Nearly voiceless, he gasps, "Tommy?"

The person glances up at him, terrified, and then *bolts*.

He's fast. Too fast. Techno's heart pounds and he's standing up, tearing after his littlest brother, even though he's already flung the doors open and is knee-deep into the snow.

"Tommy!" Techno shouts, and relief floods through him so suddenly that it nearly knocks him over. Out of all the people—out of all the spies—his little brother isn't the one he had expected.

Tommy's always been faster than him, has always been smaller and slighter, but Techno has the advantage of surprise and the advantage of decent winter clothes. Tommy collapses into a snowdrift before long, and Techno reaches him in mere seconds. He clamps a hand down onto Tommy's sleeve and pulls him around.

"Tommy," he says, breathing heavily, "What the hell are you doing in my basement?

"I'm sorry," Tommy chokes, and his head tilts back, and finally Techno can get a good look at him.

All the blood in his body turns to slush.

*What happened to him?*

"Toms," Techno says, "What—what happened—"

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Tommy chants, on the verge of panicking, and Techno’s stomach twists. “Just— just forget I’m here, I’m sorry, I just needed a place to rest, I can be gone before dawn, I swear—”

“Calm down,” Techno says, and when Tommy barely hears him, repeats it, louder, “Calm down, Tommy!”

“Just let me go,” Tommy says, terrified and wriggling like an eel, pulling his sleeve away from Techno, “I’m sorry, I’m—”

“I’m not going to hurt you,” Techno repeats, and more viciously, “Tommy, *stop fighting me!*”

Tommy wrenches his sleeve free from Techno’s grip. Underneath the moonlight, it’s awfully clear how skinny he is. He’s always been lanky, but he just looks gaunt now. His shirt is stretched out and ripping at the seams. Tommy wraps two arms around his stomach and tries desperately to keep himself together.

Techno reaches out a hand and then drops it. Bemused, he asks, “How long have you been living in my house?”

Tommy shakes his head. “You can kick me out. It’s fine.”

He doesn’t think before speaking. “I’m not going to kick you out.”

“I get it,” Tommy rambles, barely hearing anything Techno says, “It’s fine to kick me out, really, just please, *please*, don’t give me back to Dream—”

“Dream?” Techno tilts his head. “What does Dream have to do with this?”

Now Tommy’s panic takes on a different tone. It’s sharper, more acrid.

“Nothing,” he says. “Nothing at all.”

His lips are blue. They match the blue of the stolen cloak that he has, wrapped around him. Snow falls thickly down, coating their hair, eyelashes, shoulders, and Techno abruptly notices just how *cold* his little brother looks.

“Do you,” *Breathe, pause*, “Do you want to come inside?”

He blinks. “What?”

“Come in,” Techno says, “Really.”

It’s a combination of the cold, the fear, the wide, wide expanse of snow around them. Techno’s house is the only sign of civilization for half a day’s travel. It’s survival instincts; if Tommy goes into the snow now, he’s not returning. No one, not even Techno, can survive a night in the tundra by himself.

“Please,” Tommy says, “Don’t send me back.”

It's because he's scared. It's because he's lonely. That's why he turns around, shivering, and follows Techno back inside, even though Techno's mind is still trying to desperately understand the situation and what happened.

"It'll be okay," Techno says faintly, though he's not sure who he's reassuring.

Tommy, half-starved and exhausted, says nothing to reassure him back.

The moment he lies down by the fireplace, Tommy nods off, and his head goes limp.

"You'll be okay," Techno breathes, and he's not sure whether he's speaking to a mirror or to his brother.

*Both*, his traitorous mind whispers.

He watches Tommy sleep, pale and thin and frightened, and thinks, *what happened?*

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Tommy sleeps for the entire next day and deep into some of the night. Techno hears him rummaging around while the moon is high, and he doesn't expect Tommy to still be there when he wakes up.

To his surprise, he still is.

And he has a visitor.

"Phil," Techno greets, exhausted and sleep-deprived, "How are you?"

"Fine," Phil replies, "I hear you found who was stealing from you."

"I did." Techno glances over his living room. "Where is he?"

"I gave him chores," Phil says. "He's with the turtles right now."

"Really?"

"It's not like he's going to go anywhere," Phil says, "Not in the middle of this winter."

"That's not what I'm worried about."

"Hm?"

"Didn't you— see him?" Techno says, feeling sick. "Do you know what happened?"

Phil shakes his head. He looks about as bemused as Techno feels.

While Tommy was asleep, Techno ventured down to try and find where Tommy was staying. It was cleverly hidden, but a few displaced stone bricks led him to a ladder downwards. Somehow, in the few days Techno was out of his house, Tommy had taken up residence in a newly carved basement.

It was sad. And in shambles. He had a few scattered chests, a few pictures taped up on the wall that Techno didn't look too long at. Nestled underneath his pillow was a compass, engraved with the words *Your Tubbo*.

Techno left the compass and everything else untouched. Some odd feeling was rising in his throat, terrible and overwhelming. Underneath it all was the bitter sting of betrayal, still unhealed and raw.

"I think I'll go visit him," Techno decides, and pushes away from the counter. Phil remains.

The blizzard from the night before has meant that snow piles in drifts around every form that disturbs the landscape. Trees become shapeless masses of white, and hills turn into faint molehills of ice. There are steps leading directly to the greenhouse, where the turtles are kept, and that's where Techno heads.

He finds Tommy there—shoveling sand and harvesting scutes from young turtles, in the most battered set of iron armor known to man.

"Hey," Techno says, and folds his arms over the railing. Phil's bright idea of creating a greenhouse to simulate a summery environment for the turtles worked perfectly, although it is rather hot inside. Techno unhooks his cloak and leaves it on the ground. Tommy has his sleeves rolled up—although, from how ripped and dirtied they are, it really doesn't make much of a difference.

"Hi," Tommy scowls. He heaves a deep breath and bends down to check on one of the turtles; it snaps viciously at him. Techno cocks his head.

"What are you doing?"

Tommy pauses. He looks bemused, and then a note of recognition flashes over his face.

"Sorry," he says, "I forgot."

He reaches for the straps tying his chestplate together, unhooks his helmet, and dumps the lot of it onto the ground in front of Techno. Obedient and quiet, Tommy takes a step back. He ducks his head.

Techno takes a step back as well. Tommy's expression is terrifyingly blank.

Slowly, Techno asks, "What are you doing?"

Tommy looks faintly lost. "Are you... do you not want my armor?"

His iron armor is half broken, faded and chipped at the edges. It's grimy and in desperate need of a polish. Any enchantments that were once on it have long since faded. It would do

more good to be melted down than to be used as defense. It's the last thing Techno wants.

"Why would I want your armor?" Techno frowns.

Tommy ducks his head. He mutters something to himself as he begins to strap his armor back on, double and triple checking that it's on securely. He shakes the sand from the grooves. "Never mind. That was a stupid thing to say."

"You know," Techno offers, out of the blue, "I have better armor."

Tommy blinks. "What?"

"If you want it," Techno says, and he's painfully aware that history repeats itself, tenfold over, when he says, "Netherite armor, at that, if you want it."

For a second, something sparks behind Tommy's eyes. Brilliant and blue, it makes him look alive for the first time since Techno's seen him.

Just as quickly, it fades.

He crosses his arms and glares. All false bravery. "You can stop making fun of me."

Techno's confused. "I'm not."

"I know your type," Tommy continues, "If you're giving me armor just to blow it up, then I don't even want it."

He glares at Techno. Techno doesn't even know what he's done wrong.

"Why would I blow up good armor?" Something twists in Techno's stomach. "It's not enchanted, but I wouldn't waste resources like that."

Tommy's bravado melts away. "You wouldn't?"

"Of course not." Bemused, he continues, "Has someone... has someone been blowing up your armor?"

Convulsively, Tommy's hands clutch at his armor. Holding it closer to himself.

"Nah," he says, and smiles. It's the fakest smile Techno's ever seen. "Forget about it, alright? I'm just taking care of the turtles."

*Don't give me back to Dream.*

*Do you not want my armor?*

The conclusion is clear as day. "Has Dream been blowing up your things?"

Tommy's hands tighten on the shovel he picked back up. "It's none of your business."

"It is my business," Techno says, "If Dream's been bullying my little brother—"

“He’s not bullying me,” Tommy mutters, half to himself, “Dream is my friend. My *only* friend.”

Techno recoils. *What?*

Tommy gives himself a shake too, like he’s surfacing from a fugue. “Never mind. He’s not. I — I don’t know why I said that.”

“Well, then,” Techno says mildly. Hearing that *burns*.

He and Dream have never been on a good note, not when they dueled, not when Dream tried to buy his loyalty with a bag of enchanted golden apples and the sheen of netherite ingots, not when they fought side by side in the Siege of Manburg. Techno, although he would rather die before admitting it to himself, has always had this odd rivalry with Dream. Not over fighting ability, but over Tommy. In the months before joining the server, Dream and Tommy became awfully close. The kind of relationship that Techno and Tommy used to have, before everything fell to pieces.

Hearing that Dream is Tommy’s best friend is the kind of blow that can never hurt physically, but harms some soft, tender spot inside of Techno. The kind of part that he keeps guarded at all costs.

“He’s not,” Tommy glares. “Forget I said anything.”

“Alright,” Techno says, “I will.”

Tommy determinedly turns his attention back to the turtles. They bob around in the water, and Tommy reaches his hands towards one of them. Even though the turtles snap at Techno and Phil, despite Phil being one of the most gentle people Techno’s ever met, the turtle does nothing of the sort to Tommy. They almost lean into his touch.

A faint smile, tentative and slow, spreads across Tommy’s face.

Techno watches him, in his scuffed, beat up iron armor, the bags under his eyes darker than shadows. He looks like a strong wind would blow him right over.

*Dream is my only friend.*

Techno does his best to not think about it.

His best, as it turns out, is quite terrible.

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Techno doesn’t confront Tommy about it.

He doesn't confront him about anything, really. The only thing he does is demand his stolen items back, and Tommy provides them with quiet compliance, barely registering his actions. It makes Techno feel nauseated enough to place the items back into Tommy's chest, in his little basement underground, when Tommy isn't looking.

The basement itself is oppressively small. Techno, who lived underneath a lake for a good few months, still finds himself short of breath. He offers Tommy the attic, which Phil neatly renovates into a bedroom instead of an enchanting room. Tommy climbs into the loft every day and often refuses to come down.

When he does, it's to pick a fight.

“Techno,” Tommy says casually, “Why are you letting me stay?”

Techno pauses. He slips his reading glasses from his nose and places them on the table; he's rarely heard Tommy be serious before, but he recognizes the tone. The books he was enchanting fall to the floor, thrumming with energy.

“You're my brother,” he says plainly.

Tommy hums. He says nothing else.

“Why?” Techno says, and forces himself to ask, “Do you want to leave?”

Tommy shrugs. “I'm just wondering.”

“Because I don't think you have anywhere else to do,” Techno says. “Aren't you technically in exile?”

“Hah,” Tommy says scornfully. “*Exile.*”

Clearly, Techno has hit a nerve.

“Are you not exiled anymore?”

“No,” Tommy says, “I still am.”

“Well,” Techno hums, “Consider this the end of it, then. You can hardly be in exile if you're living with someone, right?”

“That's what Dream told me, you know,” Tommy says conversationally.

Techno pauses.

“What?”

“That's what Dream told me,” Tommy repeats. “That I needed to have some alone time, to *think about what I did.*” He quotes the words, mocking Dream's phrasing. “I decided I didn't have to listen to him anymore.”

“Good for you.”

“But,” Tommy says, “He was the only one who visited.”

He cuts himself off, like he’s inviting Techno to the conversation. Like there’s something he so desperately wants to say, but is unwilling to.

Techno doesn’t have time to play reindeer games. He turns to his brother and says, “Spit it out.”

“Fine,” Tommy snaps. “Why didn’t you come and visit me?”

Techno tilts his head. “I was under the impression that you didn’t want me there.”

“Of course I didn’t,” Tommy huffs. “But that doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t have visited.”

Techno sighs, exasperated. “The last time I visited, you shouted at me. You called me a lot of names.”

“Grow up, then,” Tommy sneers. “You’re a big kid, you can take it.”

Techno raises an eyebrow. Tommy’s upset, understandably so, but he’s rarely used the older sibling card.

Slowly, it begins to dawn on Techno that something is wrong.

“Didn’t other people visit, though?” Techno tries to placate him. “Didn’t— oh, what’s his name— Ranboo come and visit? And Fundy, and everyone else?”

“They never stayed,” Tommy says sullenly. “That doesn’t count.”

“It’s not like they were going to be exiled with you.”

“I didn’t want them to be exiled with me,” Tommy glares. “I just wanted—”

“Well, you can’t blame them for not staying, then.”

“They were treating me out of pity.”

“It’s hard not to pity you when you act like a kicked puppy all the time.”

Tommy’s mouth falls open, and snaps shut again. “Fuck you.”

“Wow,” Techno mocks, “Using your grown up words, hm?”

The look Tommy gives him is vicious. “Shut up.”

“No,” Techno says, incensed, because the rage in him is boiling to the top now, just as furious as how Tommy appears, “You can’t hold any of this against me, not when you pushed everyone away.”

“I didn’t push *anyone* away,” Tommy shouts. “Everyone turned against me!”

“I was never against you!”

“You blew up my country and assassinated my best friend.”

Techno points a warning finger at him. “Half of that wasn’t even my fault.”

“Come off it,” Tommy snaps, “I don’t know why I thought you would ever change— you’ve always been the same, haven’t you? Never once caring, always preaching on about *anarchy* and *government* and—”

“Why are you so upset right now?” Techno asks, exasperated, because Tommy is barely scratching the surface and there’s a well of information waiting to be released.

Tommy’s face goes red. He spins around wildly.

“You didn’t help me!” he explodes. “Neither of you helped me!””

Rage bubbles to the front of Techno’s mind. “You never helped me, either!””

Tommy’s startled into silence, only for a moment. He bristles, angry and violent and hurting. “I was exiled from everything and everyone, and the only time you visited was to laugh at me — I was alone, and I just needed someone on my side— why, Techno why?””

“I would have helped if you had just asked!””

“Really?” Tommy shouts back, face red. “I seem to remember that the last time I asked for help, you blew up my entire fucking country!””

Techno laughs, harsh and bitter. “You’re going to pull that card again? Really?””

“You killed my best friend!””

“I thought Dream was your best friend,” Techno said, and he sees the moment the words land. He sees the moment Tommy shatters.

“No,” Tommy breathes, pale, and all the bravado and false anger leaches out of him, draining in sick rivulets, “No, no, he’s not.””

“You say you remember me blowing up your country?”” Techno says slowly, taking a step forward, and Tommy presses backwards. “You know what I remember, Tommy?””

Tommy shakes his head. His heel hits the wall.

“I remember a child trying to manipulate me,” Techno says. “I remember someone who thought he was a hero, with all his little friends, promising me that everything he did was for a greater cause. I remember working for hours because I thought, *maybe he’ll see me as more this time. Maybe I’ll be more than a tool to him.* And what did you do with my trust, little brother?””

“That’s not fair,” Tommy whispers.

“You turned it against me,” Techno says. “You lied to me. You *used* me.”

He puts enough emphasis on the final phrase for Tommy to flinch back.

“And now? You lived under my house for days, you stole from me, and you’re upset that I didn’t help you when you were too blind to see what was happening right under your nose?”

Tommy opens his mouth and closes it again. No words emerge.

“Tell me,” Techno says, voice low, “Did you ever really think of me as a brother?”

Tommy’s hands are shaking. It appears that Techno has struck a nerve.

“You,” he tries, but his voice fails him, “You’re...”

Guilt, hot and shameful, rushes over Techno. It feels like boiling pitch and it tastes like salt and smoke. For a moment all he can see is this speechless kid in front of him— who barely sees him as a brother, who has only ever used him— and all he can see is the broken shell of someone who used to have so much more fire.

“Go away,” Techno says. He tries to hide how his own hands are shaking, too.

“What?” Tommy stammers. “Where?”

“Anywhere but here,” Techno says. “Anywhere I can’t see you.”

Tommy presses back until he’s flat against the wall, turns, and flees.

Techno does not watch to see where he goes.

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Phil finds him a few hours later.

“I thought I’d find you here,” he comments.

The village is abandoned and empty. It’s a stone’s throw away from his home, but one blood moon and an unfortunate surge of zombies resulted in a villager massacre. Now, Techno finds it as the one place where he can have complete silence.

The torch flickers and sputters at his side. Snow, gently, trickles from the sky.

“I assume you talked to Tommy,” Techno says without preamble.

“I did.”

“And?”

“I’m not taking any sides.”

“Funny,” Techno says callously. “I thought I was supposed to be your favorite.”

Phil sighs. “Techno...”

“Sorry,” Techno says. “I know we agreed to not bring that up.”

They have agreed. Techno, with his competitive nature, will never forget their quiet conversations spoken in the dead of night. Phil’s words will always remain burned into his soul, scalded there forever.

“He’s upset, you know.”

“Because of me.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You were thinking about it.”

Phil hums. He doesn’t respond.

The snow crunches under Techno’s feet as he shifts.

“Well?” he asks. “Was I wrong?”

Phil hums. “Do you want the answer that will make you feel better or worse?”

Techno huffs. “Just say it.”

Phil’s voice is matter-of-fact. “You and Tommy are both hurting in different ways. You just don’t understand it yet.”

Techno bristles. “He accused me of—”

“You didn’t help him,” Phil interrupts coldly, “And he used you. There’s no place to go but forward.”

“As if you’re one to talk,” Techno retorts. “You’re the one who killed Wilbur.”

Phil’s hand, resting on the cobblestone stairs, goes white. His other hand trembles. For a moment Techno stares at his father, and he considers the invisible lines in the sand that they’ve never crossed.

Wilbur’s ghost appears at Techno’s house, from time to time, but his visits are much more rare now. Shell-like and empty, he wanders across thresholds and laughs easily, eyes clouded over with naivety. Techno’s given up on him a long time ago. None of his words make it through. He uses the blue dye that Wilbur pours at his feet to dye his cloak, and throws the

rest of it away. He's not the Wilbur that Techno used to know, and there's no point in clinging to a mirage. It'll fade eventually.

Phil whispers, "You know how much I regret that."

Wilbur's grave, long since grown over with moss. It rests in the middle of the spruce trees. Neither of them have visited it.

"I know," Techno says faintly. "That wasn't fair of me."

It's the same conversation they've had a million times over. *You robbed me of my twin. Your twin destroyed everything he loved.* It's always a push and a pull, and they always find themselves at a terrible impasse.

Phil tried to explain it, once. The look in Tommy's eyes, the soul sand caked underneath Techno's fingernails, Wilbur's terrible laugh when he pressed the button. But all the words in the world will never make up for what Phil stole from him. No matter how much Wilbur demanded it.

Wilbur's ghost holds no answers. Techno doesn't listen to him.

"You need to go apologize to Tommy," Phil says. It's a welcome diversion.

"No," Techno says.

"*Techno.*"

"He used me."

"He's a child."

The rope inside of Techno frays, threatening to snap.

"Did I not deserve to be a child, too?"

Phil pauses.

Techno continues, voice ragged, "It's always been Technoblade versus the world. Technoblade versus my brothers, Technoblade versus the enemy. I grew up having to protect and defend. I never got to be a kid. Not like he did."

"You're jealous?"

"No," Techno corrects. "I'm grieving."

Phil doesn't understand what Techno is grieving for. Techno, somehow, finds himself okay with that.

"It'll take time," Phil says. "I hope you'll listen to him."

The torch, red and yellow and gold, blurs in Techno's vision. It takes him a moment to realize it's from tears rather than the snow.

"I will," he says.

"Talk to me when it's done," Phil says gently, "Alright?"

Techno's voice is hollow. "Alright."

"Come here."

There is a piece of Techno's soul, aching and hurting, that carves itself ever deeper into his heart. It swells, housing everything vulnerable Techno tries to hide about himself, and Phil folds his arms around that hurting piece of Techno so carefully. Techno leans his head against the blue cloak, closes his eyes, and imagines that in a different world, everything is different. In a different world, the four of them are a happy family again. They've found each other, despite all the odds, and are willing to push through.

Phil's arms are warm. The air is so, so cold.

Techno allows himself to fall into his father's embrace.

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Tommy isn't in his upstairs bedroom, curled by the bookshelves. When Techno can't find him there, he does the next best thing and goes to the basement.

They installed a trapdoor, so it was easier than carefully replacing the stone bricks anytime Tommy needed to get to his room, and Techno eases it open. The hinges are freshly oiled, and it opens noiselessly. The ladder creaks on his way down, and Techno lands on a carpeted floor.

It's much nicer down here than the first time he visited. Clearly, Phil has been helping to spruce it up.

Tommy's ender chest is open, and with glazed over eyes, Tommy looks through it. In his hands is a stack of glossy photographs, and he turns them over, one after the other.

"Hi," Techno says softly. Tommy doesn't react.

Awkwardly, Techno takes a seat on Tommy's bed. He catches a glimpse of the photograph; it's of the Christmas tree, lit up in all its glory, by the portal to the community house. Wilbur's ghost peeks out from the side, a broad, loopy smile on. The edges of the photograph are frayed, rubbed smooth by anxious fingers.

Stiltedly: "Is that the Christmas tree?"

Tommy clears his throat. “It’s whatever.”

Techno hasn’t been there, but he’s heard about it. “It looks pretty.”

Tommy squeezes his eyes shut, and a choked sob slips from his lips. “I guess. I don’t really care.”

Techno clears his throat, “Could I see it?”

The very nature of softness feels foreign to him.

Tommy clears his throat and passes the picture over. Flippantly, like he doesn’t care at all. He presses both palms over his eyes and tucks his knees up to his chest.

The picture is glossy and smooth under Techno’s fingertips. There’s a scribbled note in blue pen on the back of it: *to tommy! from ghostbur*.

“You know,” Techno says, not taking his eyes away from Wilbur’s handwriting, “Phil has been meaning to put up a Christmas tree here.”

Tommy scrubs at his eyes. He takes the picture back from Techno’s fingers and sets it back into his bare ender chest. “Really?”

The words feel strange to speak, but he says them anyway. “The three of us could decorate it together.”

“Hm.”

“We could invite Wilbur,” Techno says.

“The four of us,” Tommy mumbles. “I think that would be nice.”

Neither of them speak for a long moment. Techno stretches out his legs and looks around aimlessly. In the corner is the golden bell, rubbed to a shine beneath Tommy’s fingers. Phil has helped wallpaper the room in yellow, like a pocket of sunlight. Chests are stacked against the wall, though they look empty. There’s a bookshelf in one corner. A trunk log in the other. His little brother, curled up as if he’s hoping that if he’s small enough, nothing will see him.

“You are my brother,” Tommy mumbles. “You’ve always been my brother.”

Techno tilts his head to look at him. “I know.”

“It’s just...” He spreads his hands out, “You said I don’t see you as a brother, but...” He pauses, sucks a shuddering breath in, “You’re so much more.”

“Mhm.”

“Even though I’m angry at you.”

“I know.”

“I’m so angry,” Tommy whispers, “I’m so angry at everything.”

“I know.”

“He was so *cruel*,” Tommy breathes, and maybe without realizing he holds onto Techno’s arm, grip like a vice, “And he was the only person to visit. There was no one else to blame but you.”

Techno understands. Oh, how he understands.

“I’m angry too,” Techno says. “I’m angry that I was used.”

“I know,” Tommy whispers, and his eyes are wide and blue and threaten to spill, “I’m so sorry, I’m really so sorry.”

“But I think I can understand,” Techno continues. “I think there are some things that are more important than anarchy.”

Tommy laughs, wet and choked. “Like what?”

Techno pretends to consider. “Like you. And Phil. And Wilbur.”

“Family,” Tommy says.

Techno nods. “Family.”

Tommy’s shoulders shake. He curls into Techno’s side, wraps two arms around him, and pretends like he’s not crying. Techno, for sake of decency, pretends not to notice. He casts his eyes to the low ceiling and waits until Tommy finally wrings himself dry.

“Why don’t you come upstairs,” Techno offers. “Phil can make us hot chocolate. It’ll be like — like the good old days.”

“Yeah,” Tommy breathes. “The old days.”

The old days, when they would fall asleep in the same bed, curled into each other. Wilbur would wake up early, loud and vibrant, and Techno would sleep in until noon. Phil, the only responsible one, would barge into his room, flick open the curtains, allow the light to flood in and wake him up. The old days, when Tommy would turn the jukebox volume all the way up, until Techno’s very lungs shook with the drums, and when he and Wilbur would sing along so loudly both their lungs ran out of breath. The old days when all that mattered was themselves, four golden crowns and coins, framed on the mantle, the crackle of the fireplace, the taste of cocoa in their mouths.

When had life ever been so simple?

Phil doesn’t comment on how Tommy clings to Techno like his life relies on it. He doesn’t comment on how Techno practically does the same. What he does is pass them a mug of hot chocolate, sweet and rich and healing, and closes the drapes to the storm outside.

The fireplace crackles. Tommy's head slumps against Techno's shoulder, and with a start, Techno realizes that he's fallen asleep.

"Figured it out?" Phil murmurs.

Techno watches the flames flicker. If he looks closely enough, he thinks he can make out the slightest hint of Wilbur's face, watching over them. For once, he's warm.

"I think so," he says, and leaves it at that.

## End Notes

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